

interioridades

sinfonía visual 490



Sonya Noskowiak



*Sonya Noskowiak
Cardinal*





















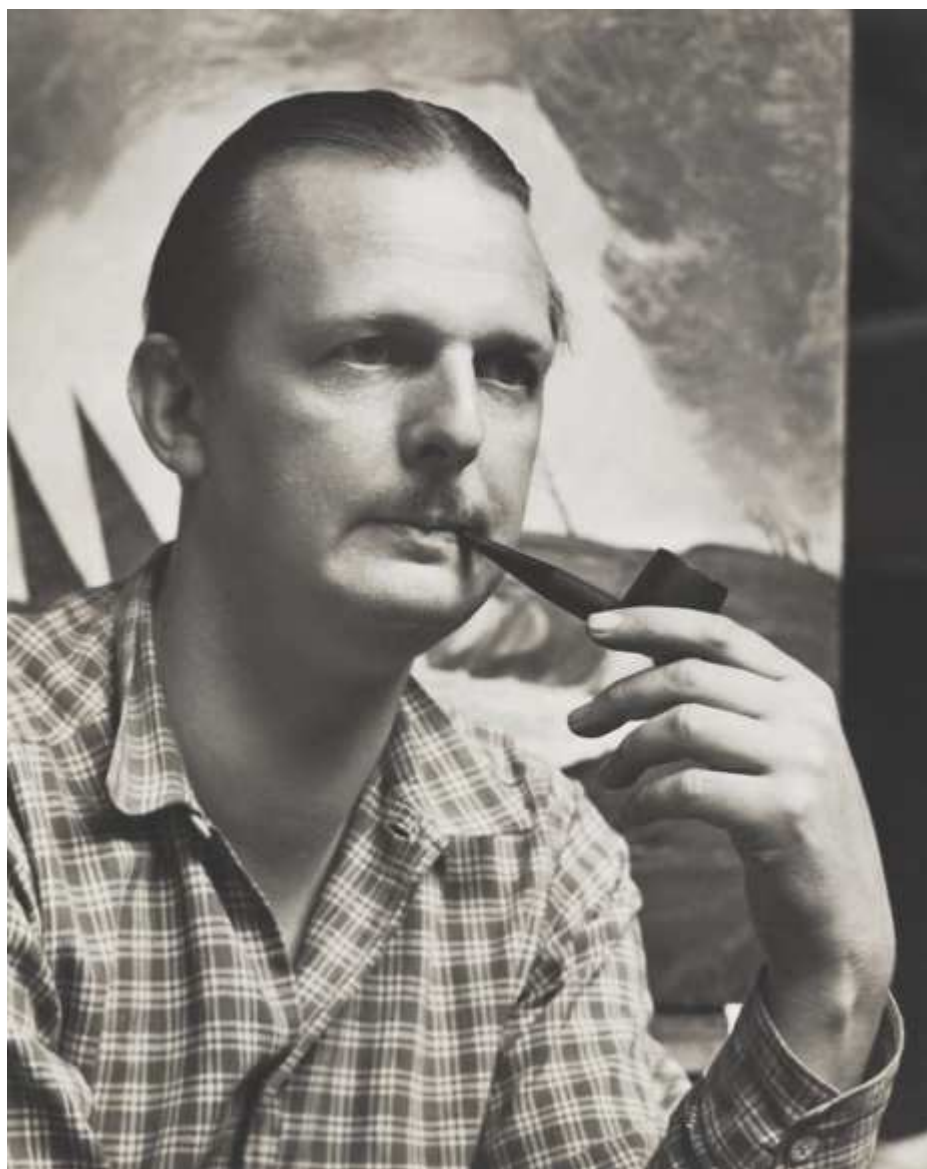


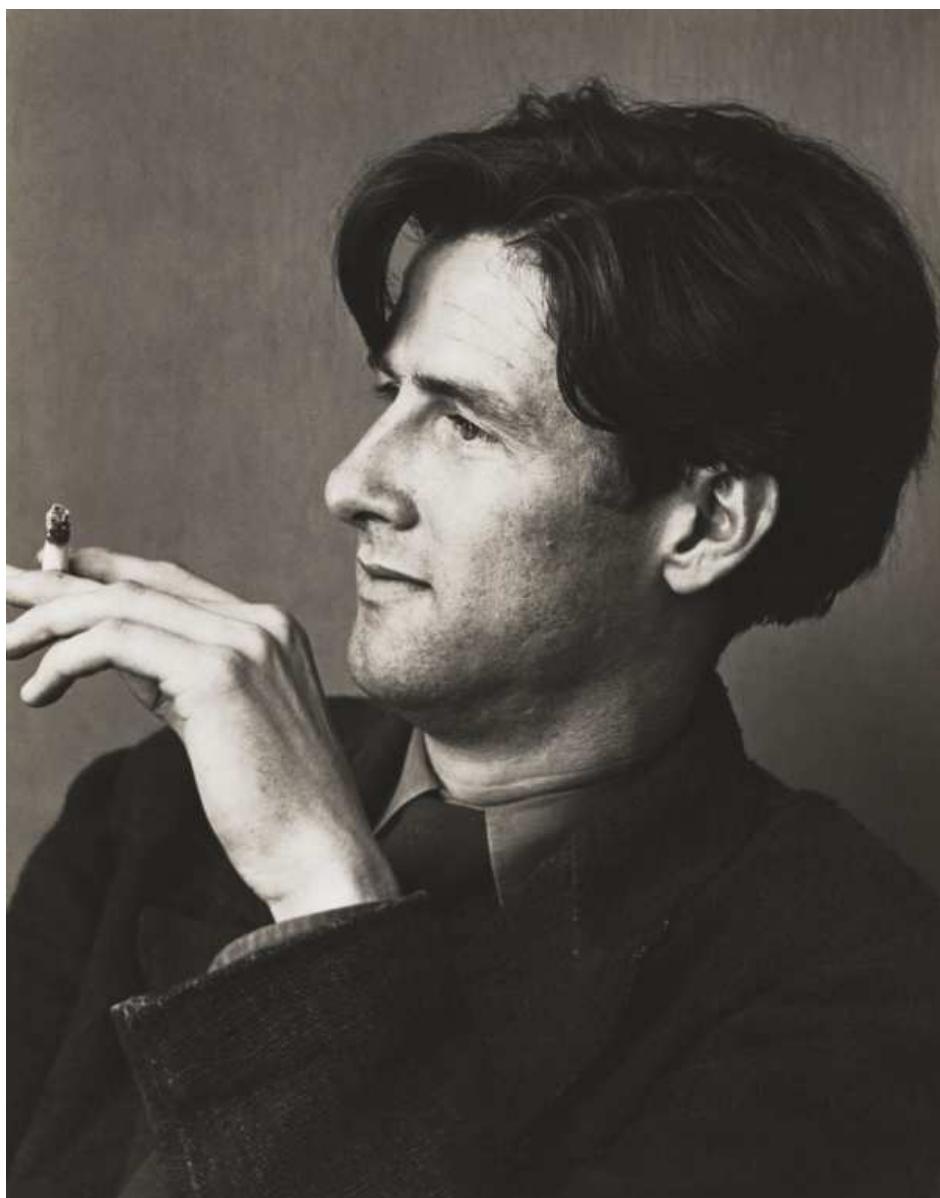


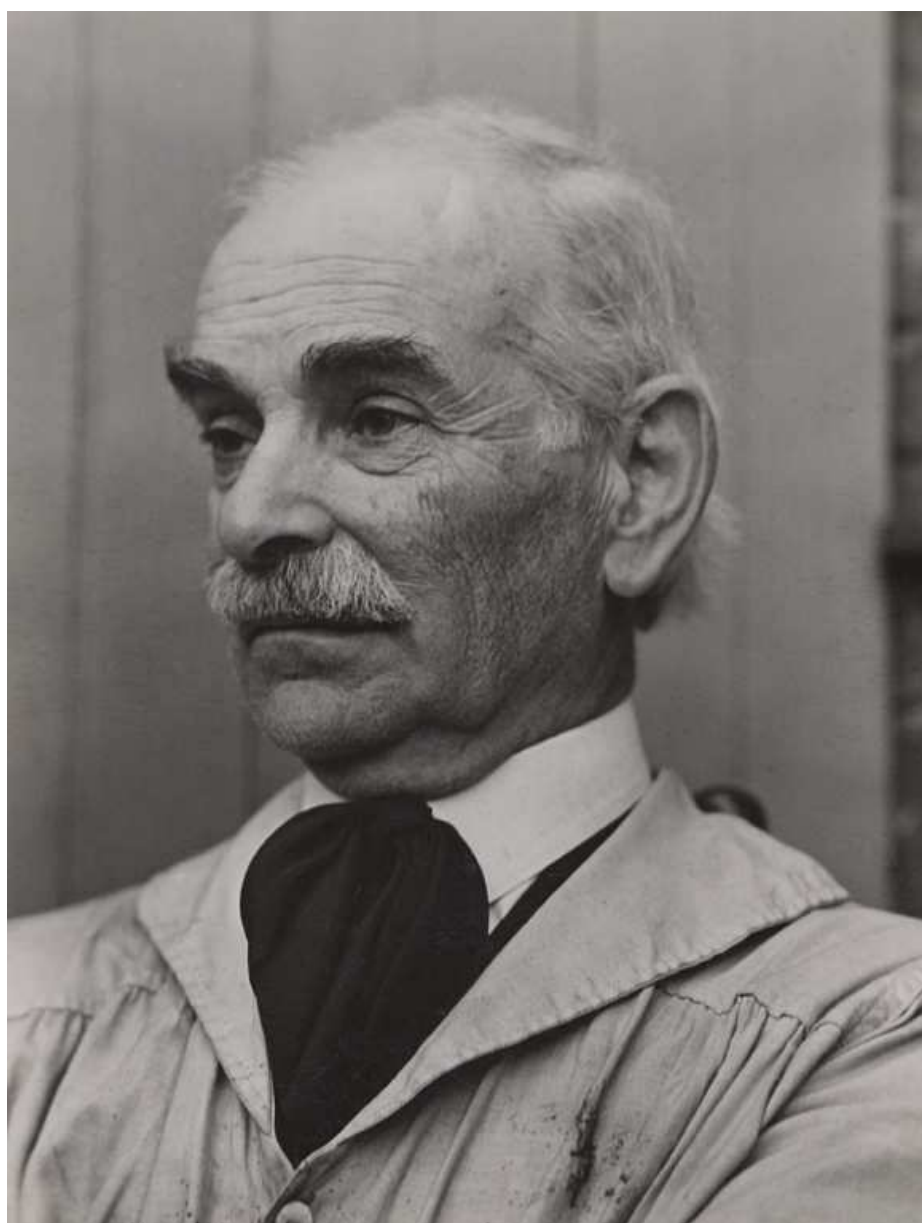


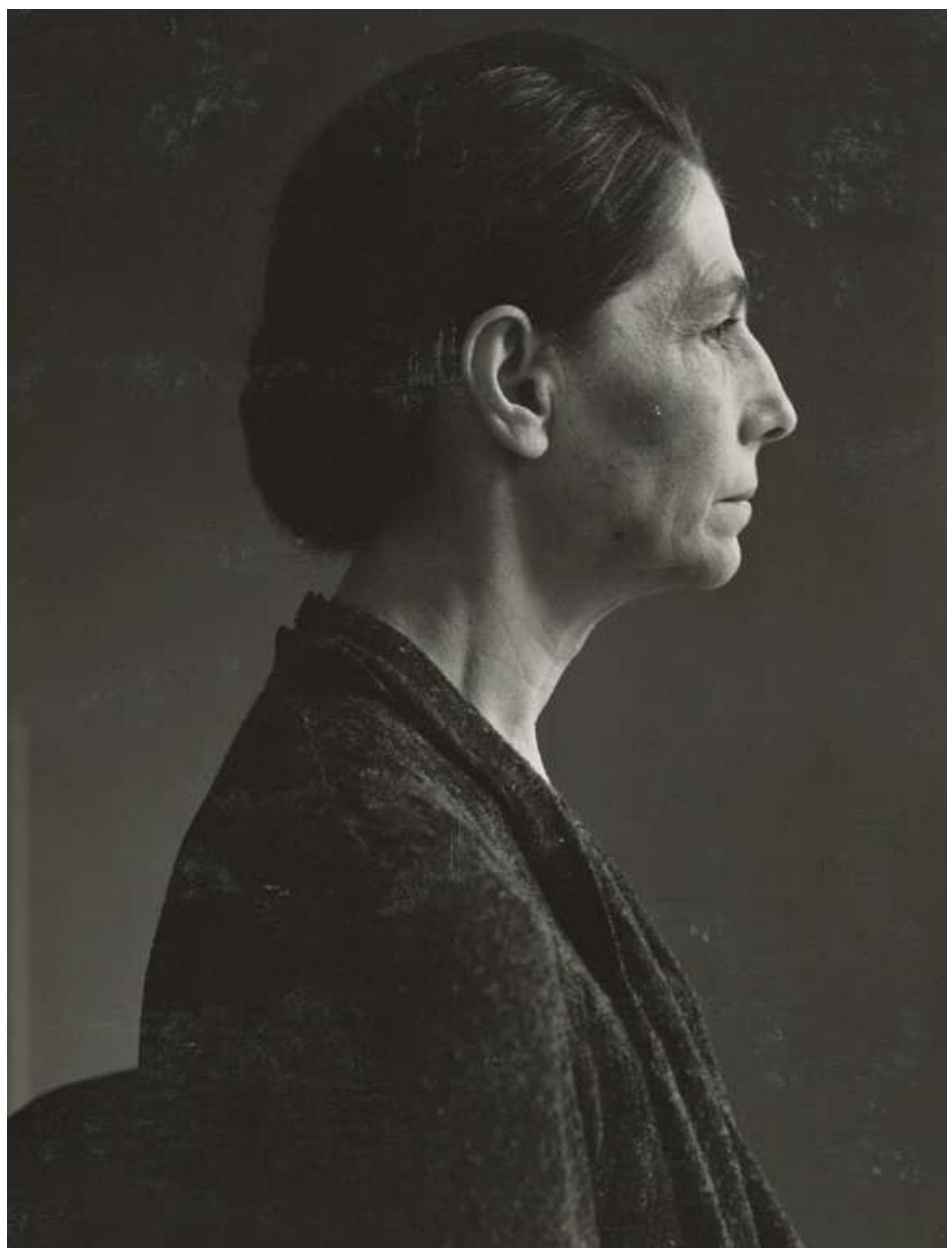




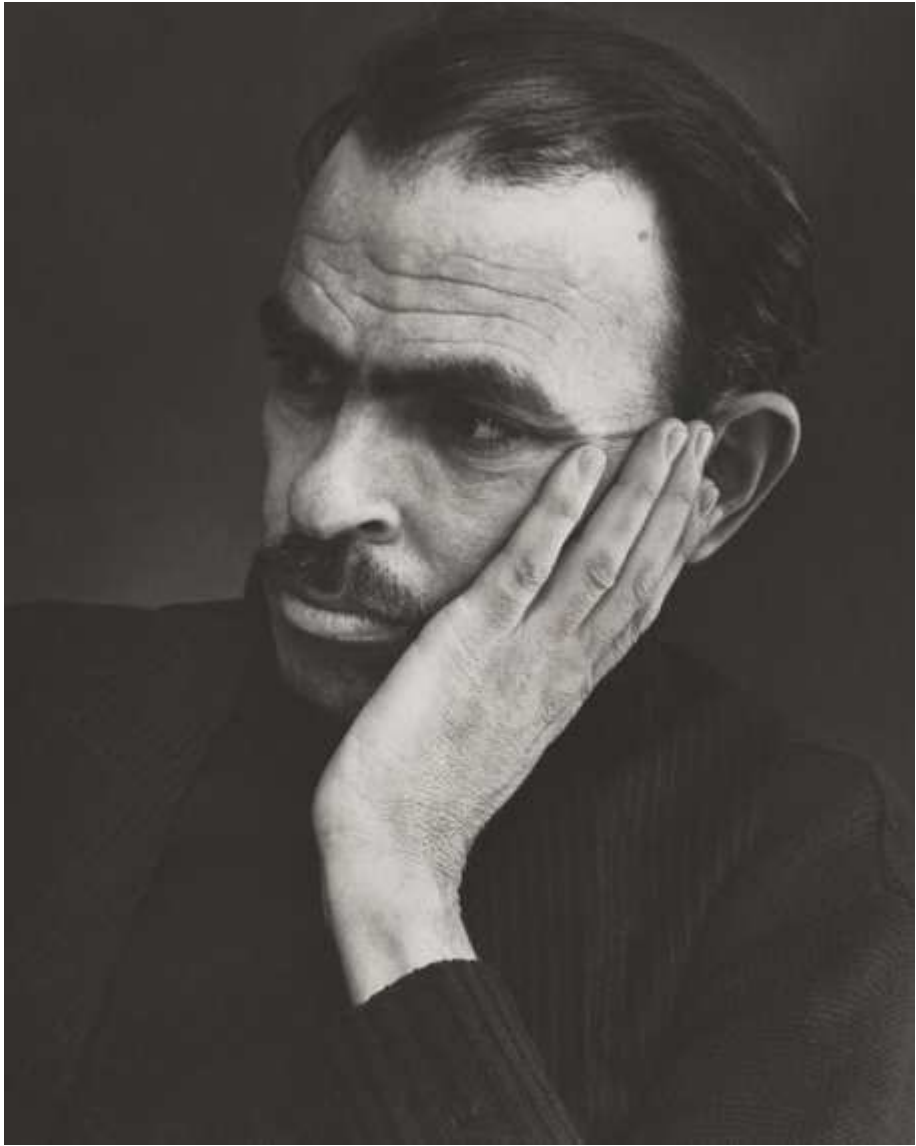














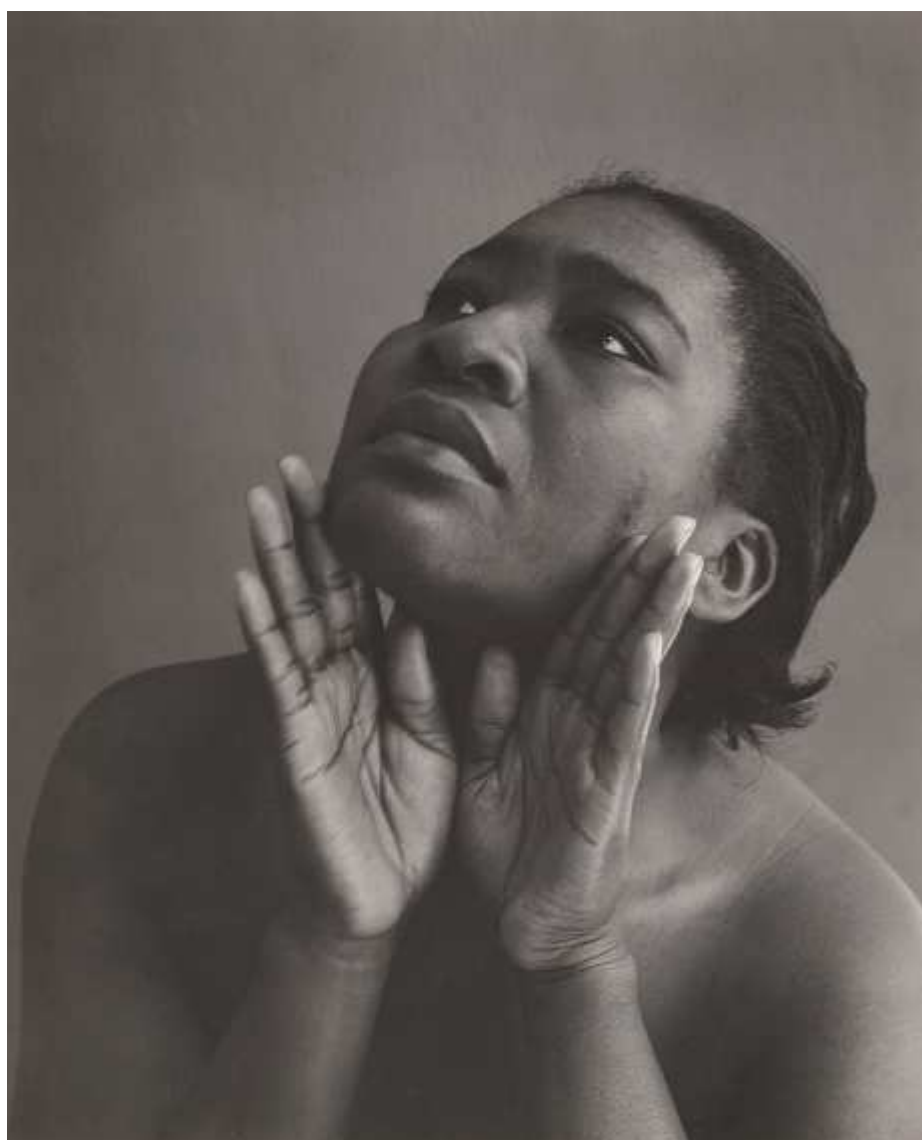
























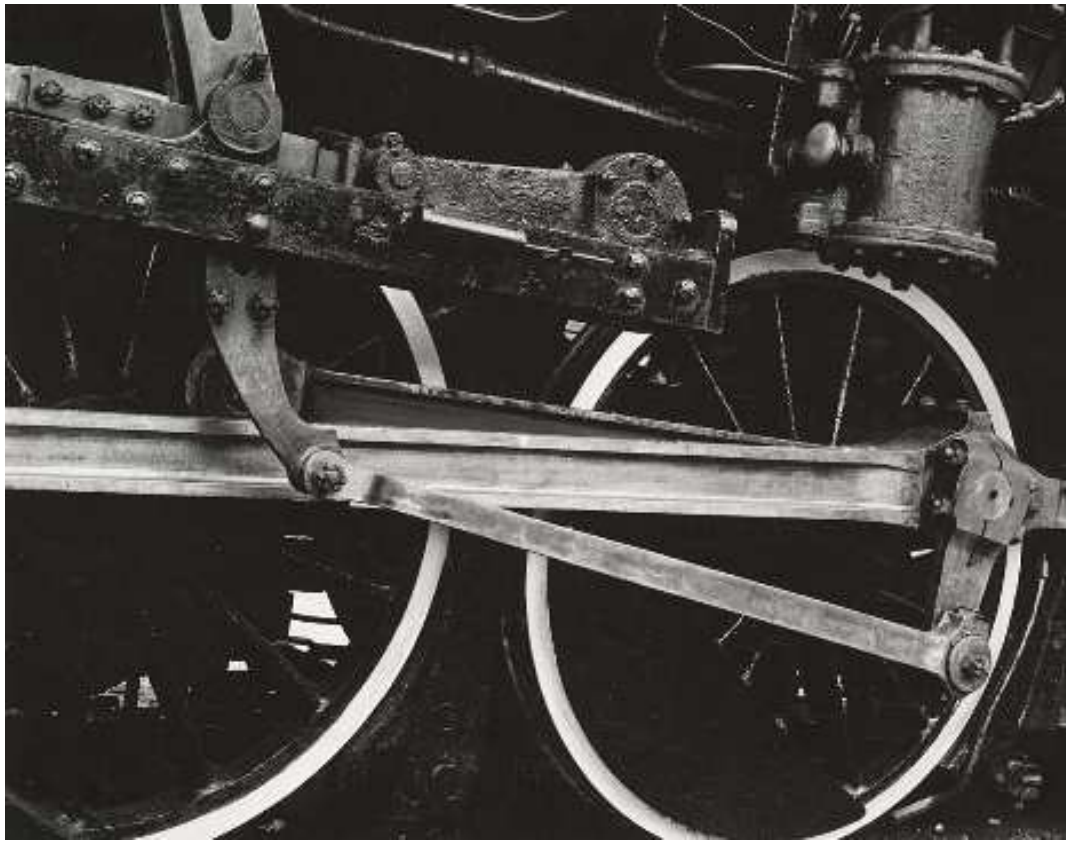
















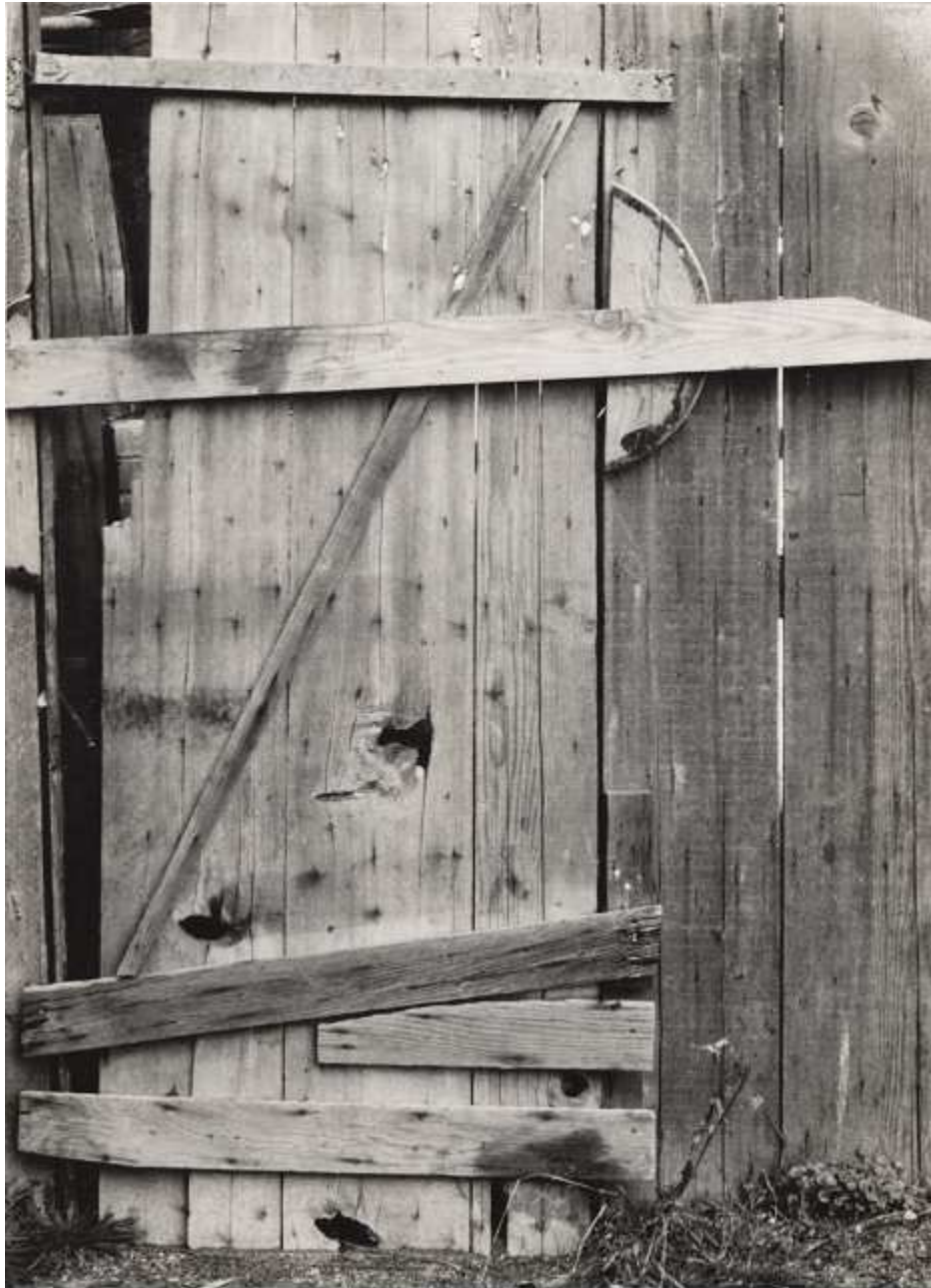






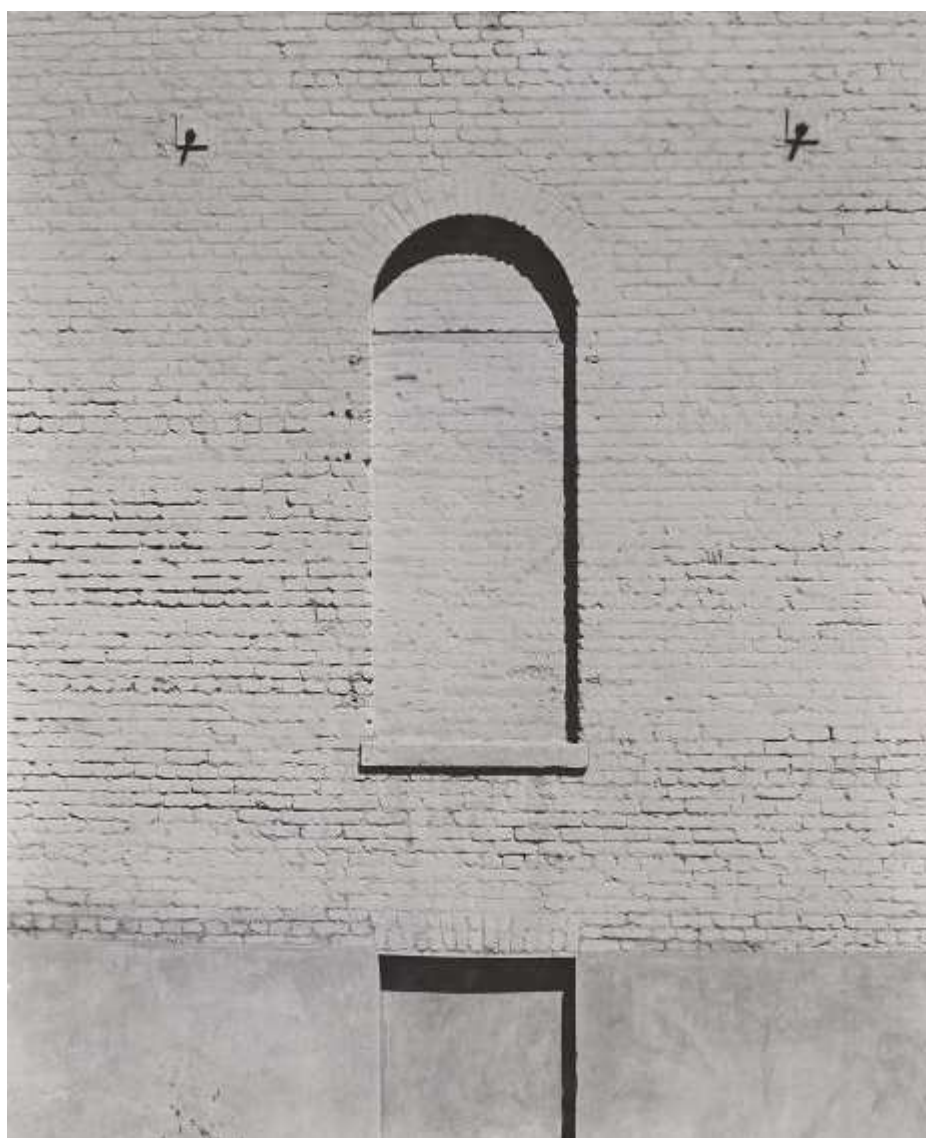




















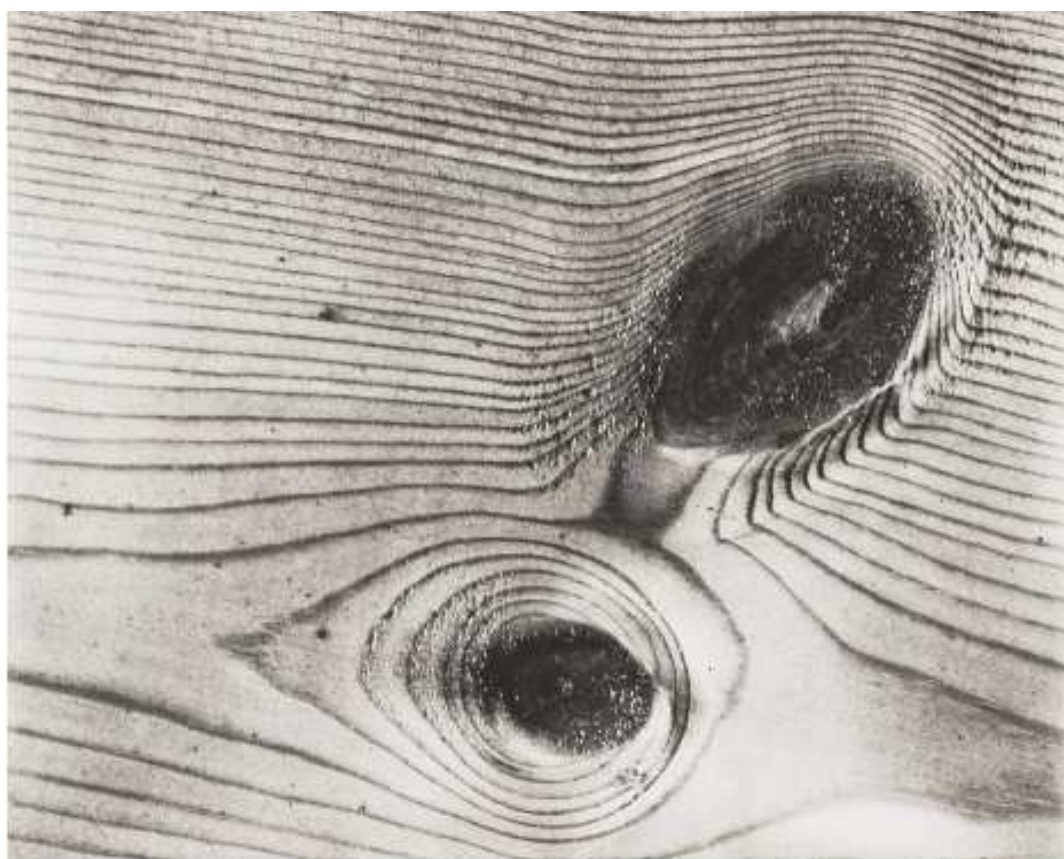






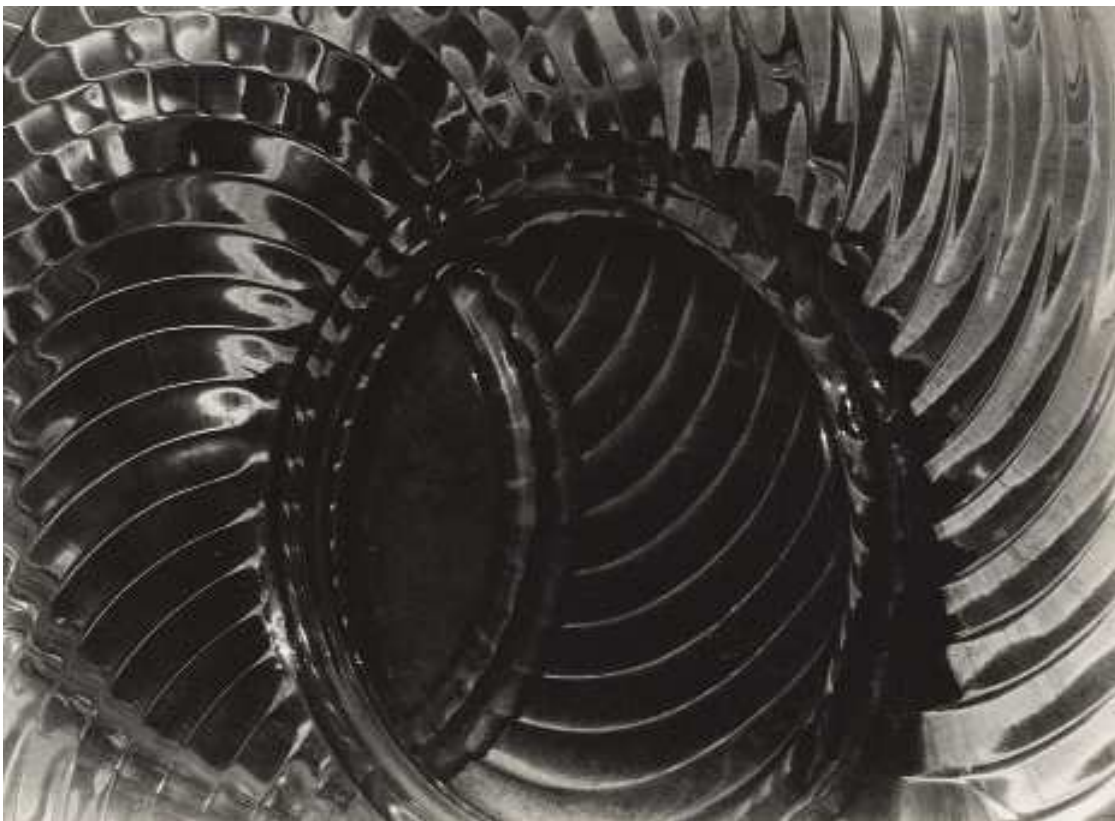










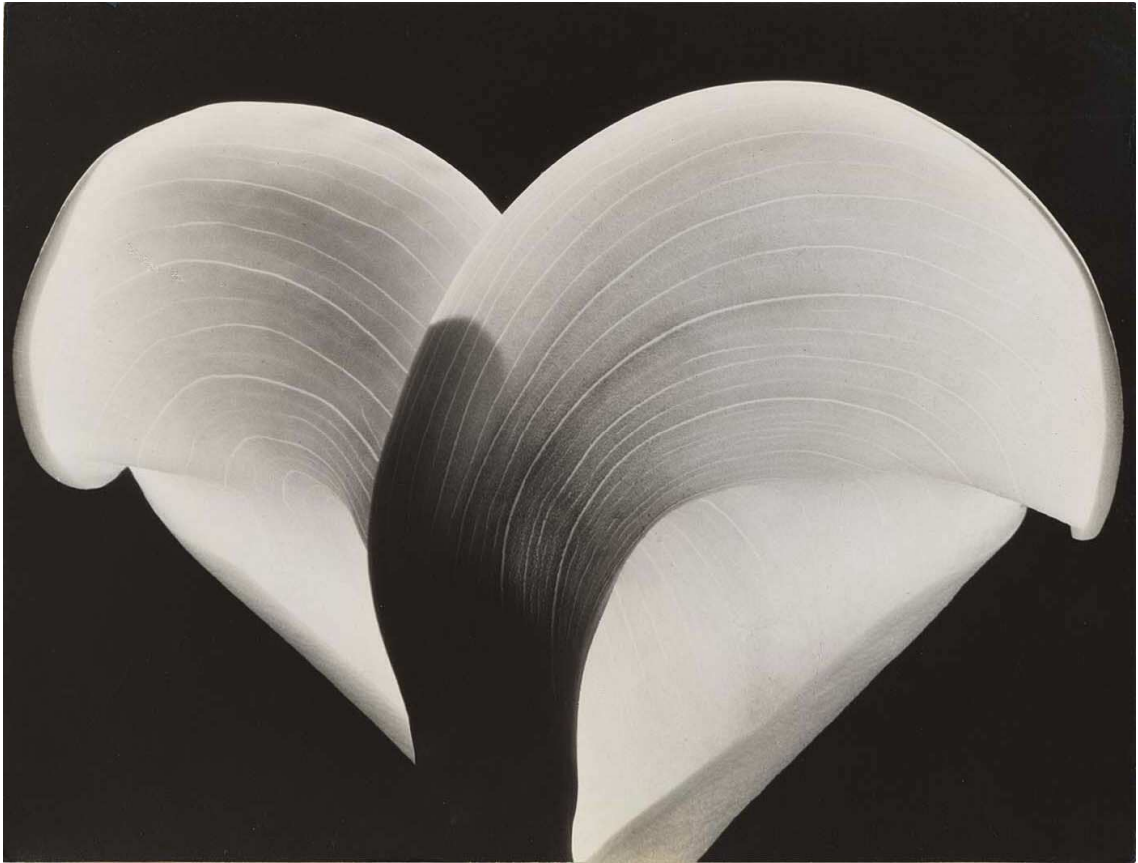






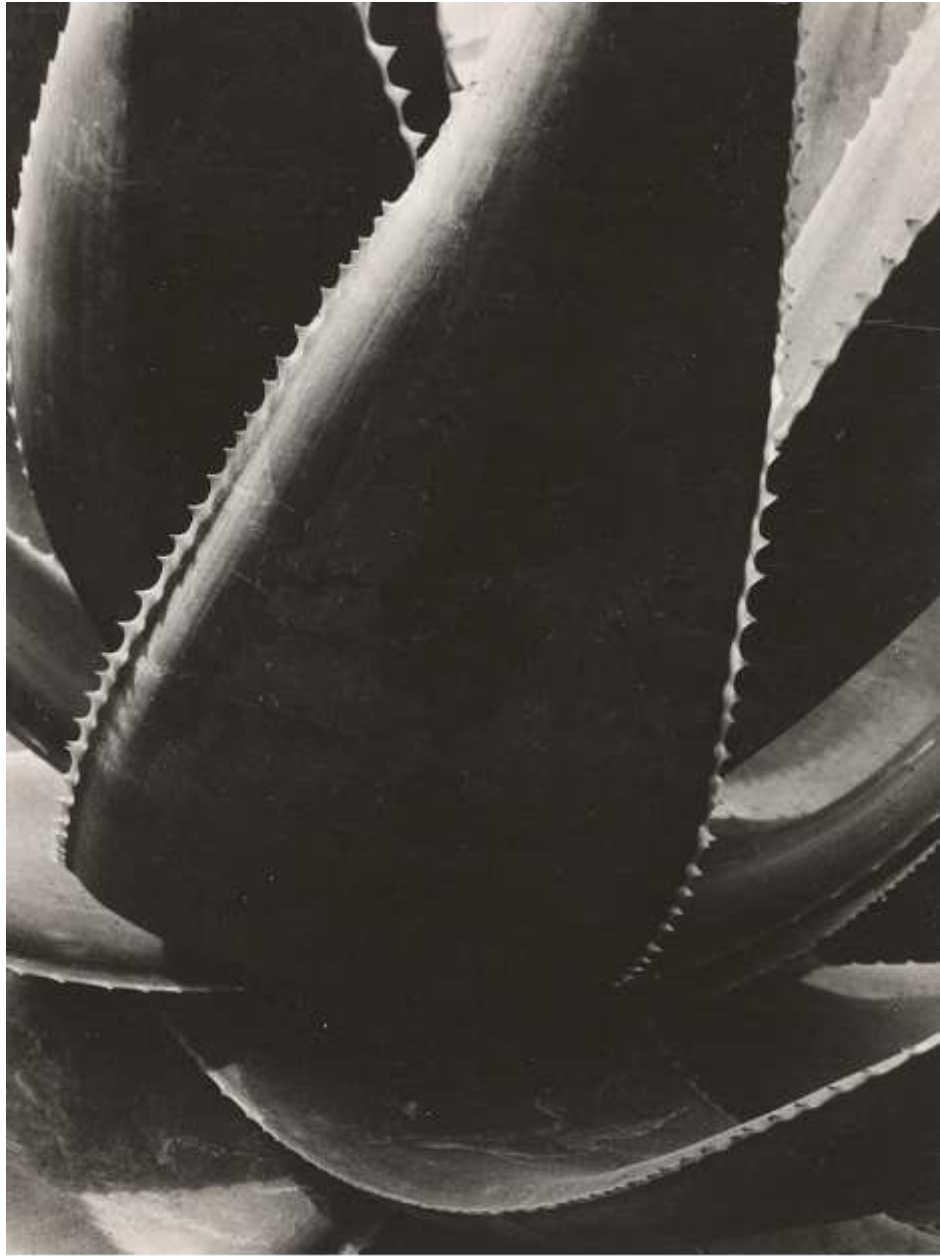


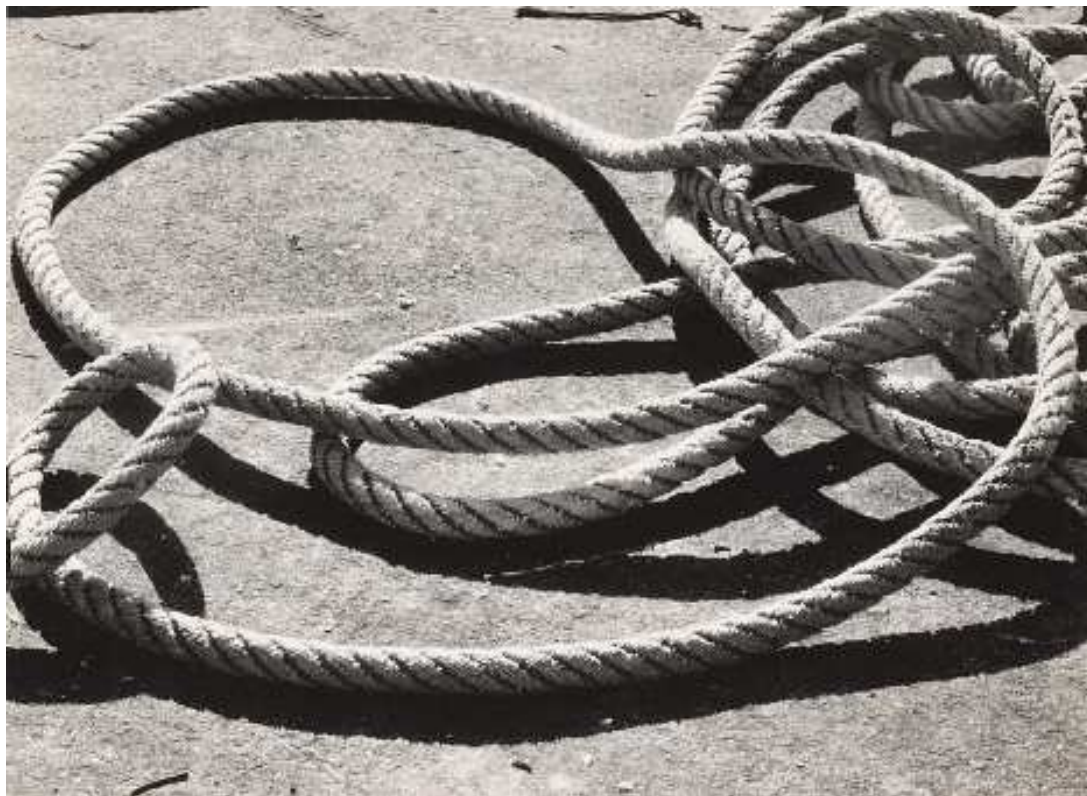














Lighthouse Interior,
1933
76:009:191, 285



(Glass Plates), 1930
76:009:286



(Glass Plates), 1930
76:009:192



untitled
76:009:231



untitled
76:009:331



untitled
76:009:316



untitled, 1936
76:009:218



untitled
76:009:217



untitled, 1930
76:009:250



untitled, 1937
76:009:189



untitled
76:009:188



untitled, 1931
76:009:226



Ovens — Taos Pueblo,
N.M., 1933
76:009:271



untitled, 1930
76:009:243



untitled, 1930
76:009:244



untitled
76:009:345



untitled, 1932
76:009:267



untitled, 1930
76:009:245



untitled, 1930
76:009:246



White Radish, 1932
76:009:258



Cactus, 1932
76:009:212



untitled
76:009:322



*Cottonwood Tree — Taos,
New Mexico*, 1933
76:009:260



untitled
76:009:206



untitled
76:009:207



untitled
76:009:478



untitled, 1933
76:009:281



untitled
76:009:208



untitled
76:009:213



*Sage Brush and Rock —
Nevada*, 1940
76:009:210



untitled, 1933
76:009:262



untitled, 1930
76:009:248

Sonya Noskowiak: A Groundbreaking but Forgotten Photographer



Sonya Noskowiak 1932 (Imogen Cunningham)

When **Sonya Noskowiak** first expressed interest in photography, her boss, photographer **Johan Hagemeyer**, wrote in his diary this dream was a joke. But **Noskowiak** would later become a central figure in one of the great art movements of the century. Unfortunately, little is known today about the artist, most written about her relates to her relationships with men like **Hagemeyer** and, more prominently, photographer **Edward Weston**, whom she dated for several years. We are lucky, however, that hundreds of **Noskowiak's** prints still exist, many of which are housed at **the Center for Creative Photography (*)** in Tucson, Arizona. With this archive, it is possible to construct a robust picture of **Noskowiak's** life and art.

Noskowiak was born on **November 25, 1900**, in Leipzig, Germany to Polish parents. She spent most of her youth in Chile, with time spent in Panama, before her family moved to the United States when she was about fifteen. She bought her first camera, a Kodak Brownie, when she was sixteen years old. At age nineteen, **Noskowiak** moved from Sacramento to San Francisco and enrolled in secretarial school. When she was twenty-five, **Noskowiak** began working as an assistant in **Hagemeyer's** summer studio in Carmel, one hundred miles down the misty California coast. Her interest in photography blossomed during this time.

In **1929**, **Noskowiak** met **Weston** in Carmel. They began dating almost immediately, soon she was his studio assistant and occasional model. **Weston** first taught her to spot photos, the process of touching up minor flaws in prints. He gave **Noskowiak** her first professional camera, but provided no film. For several months, **Noskowiak** worked alongside **Weston**, pretending to photograph while he taught her the mechanics of photography. In a **February 1930** entry from **Weston's** diary he mentions three of **Noskowiak's** first negatives: the hands of **Weston's** son **Neil**, the back of a chair and a halved red cabbage. He loved the work.

Weston himself had photographed produce for a few years, but the idea of altering the subject — *such as slicing it open* — was novel and intriguing. That year he created several works inspired by **Noskowiak's** early negative, including Red Cabbage Halved, Red Cabbage Quartered, Kale Halved, Artichoke Halved and Onion Halved. Though emphasis is often placed on **Weston's** influence on **Noskowiak**, **Weston** respected **Noskowiak** as an artist, and her influence on him, at least in this instance, is evident.

Group f.64

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, fine art photography was defined by pictorialism, a style that enjoyed aesthetic merit but was fundamentally self-conscious. In response to claims that photography was not an art form, but rather scientific documentation, pictorialists aimed to replicate the styles and principles of established fine arts.

Pictorialist photographs are dreamlike and vaporous; some are difficult to distinguish from paintings or engravings.



Sonya Noskowiak 1930 (Edward Weston)

New York-based photographer and promoter **Alfred Stieglitz** was the grand poobah of pictorialism, and both **Hagemeyer and Weston** were once among his many acolytes. In the mid-1920s, Weston and others began to turn against both pictorialism and **Stieglitz**.

Many Californian photographers suffered from feelings of provincialism; a concern that grew with the advent of “*straight photography*” on the West Coast. Eschewing the romanticism of pictorialism, proponents of straight photography embraced the medium itself, including its limitations, and hoped to show subjects “*as they were*”.

A party on **October 15, 1932**, at 683 Brockhurst Street in Oakland, proved to be a pivotal moment for the burgeoning art movement. Photographers **Willard Van Dyke** and **Mary Jeannette Edwards** rented

the building from **Anne Brigman**, a former pictorialist, and used it as a studio and gallery. In addition to **Van Dyke and Edwards, Noskowiak, Weston, Ansel Adams, Imogen Cunningham, Mary Jeannette's** father **John Paul Edwards**, and **Preston Holder** attended the party.

As the night wore on, the photographers shared recent prints and discussed the struggles of Western photographers: their search for independence and recognition. With **Van Dyke and Adams** leading the charge, the partygoers founded **Group f.64**, dedicated to sharp-focused and detailed photography. The name refers to the smallest aperture available on large format cameras; the use of which creates crisp, highly-focused images. The group's original members included the photographers at the party, minus **Mary Jeannette and Holder**, plus **Henry Swift**, a student of **Weston's**.

The group secured an exhibition at the M. H. de Young Memorial Museum in San Francisco, but they were given less than a month to prepare for the opening. In addition to the group's core members, **Holder, Consuelo Kanaga, Alma Lavenson, and Edward's son Brett Weston** were invited to show their work. **Hagemeyer** declined an invitation to participate. The exhibition opened on **November 15, 1932** and only ran through the end of the year, but it made a lasting impact on photography.

The show included 80 works from eleven artists. With the exception of **Weston**, who had established prices to uphold, the artists sold prints for \$10 each (*equivalent to \$170 today*). **Noskowiak** displayed nine works, including Cactus, Calla Lily, Hands, Kelp, Leaf, Palm Blossom, Water Lily Leaves, and two pieces titled Sand Pattern. Because much of **Noskowiak's** work is not definitively dated, this list gives some insight into the nature of her early work. The selection is almost entirely devoted to close-up botanical photographs. Landscapes and portraits, which would later become defining elements of **Noskowiak's** practice, were absent from this inaugural show.

A **1930** photograph titled Kelp, possibly the one from the **De Young** exhibition, focuses on the base of a kelp plant. The roots resemble bubbling metallic worm-like forms. The wrinkly texture of the kelp's surface is clearly visible. Kelp is an intimate study of an object not readily

identifiable save for its title, a characteristic of many works of straight photography.

Another photograph, *Calla Lily* (1932), also possibly shown at the **De Young**, demonstrates **Noskowiak**'s thoughtful treatment of light. The flower's milky white spathe is set against a vacuous black background. The flower appears as if floating, but the light falls on the veins of the leaves, grounding the luminous spathe.

A work titled *Sand Pattern* (1932) looks like aerial photographs of the Sahara or a satellite image of some uncharted Martian desert. Tentacles of sand stretch out in all directions as if they're grasping for a nearby oasis. The sand resembles the aluminum powder found in an Etch A Sketch, almost shimmering. In actuality, the patterns might cover an area no larger than a footprint, possibly on a Carmel beach.



Sand Pattern 1932 (Sonya Noskowiak)

In her recent book **Group f.64**, **Mary Street Alinder**, a scholar and former assistant to **Adams**, concludes that the de **Young** show was considered unimportant by the news media. More press was given at the time to the de **Young**'s concurrent Horse Show, which included paintings by **Édouard Manet**, bronze horses from Persia and vases from Greece. **Group f.64**'s exhibition was nonetheless reviewed by the **San Francisco Chronicle**, **The Argonaut**, the **San Francisco Call-Bulletin**, **Camera Craft** and **The Wasp News-Letter**. These reviews ranged from negative to tempered to positive. Writing for **The Argonaut**, **Junius Cravens** called out **Noskowiak**'s Palm Blossom as among the stronger works in the show. In his unforgiving review (**) in **Camera Craft**, **Sigismund Blumann** remarked, *"Perhaps a generation or two of nothing else and a latter-day Soviet training will inure us to this novelty."*

Early Success

In the summer of **1933**, **Noskowiak**, **Weston** and **Van Dyke** traveled to New Mexico to shoot the scenery. At least two of her photographs can be attributed to this trip. In both, **Noskowiak** pulls a bit away from her subjects and, if not landscapes, creates something approaching landscapes. **Cottonwood Tree – Taos, New Mexico** pictures a bare cottonwood tree cropped close, but not nearly as intimate as Kelp and other early works.

Ovens, Taos Pueblo, New Mexico (1933) is an even starker change from **Noskowiak**'s previous work. Of her dated photographs, this is among the earliest to focus on human material culture. Shot at the ancient Taos Pueblo, three adobe horno ovens foreground the image. **Noskowiak** may have struggled with the awkward and alternating natural light on the adobe house in the background, but she would eventually master the angles and planes of architectural structures.



Cottonwood Tree – Taos, New Mexico, 1933. (Sonya Noskowiak)



Ovens, Taos Pueblo, New Mexico, 1933 (Sonya Noskowiak)

The photographic results of the trip impressed **Van Dyke and Adams** enough to declare **Noskowiak** one of the nation's top female photographers. Later that summer, she was given her first solo show at Denny-Watrous Gallery in Carmel. The exhibition included a series of landscapes from New Mexico.

In November, **Noskowiak** held another solo exhibition at 683 Brockhurst. **Between 1933 and 1940**, she participated in a number of **Group f.64** exhibitions, including shows at the Fine Arts Gallery in San Diego, Fresno State College, Mills College Art Gallery, the Portland Art Museum in Oregon, the Seattle Fine Arts Museum and the Golden Gate International Exposition.

Group f.64 Dissolves

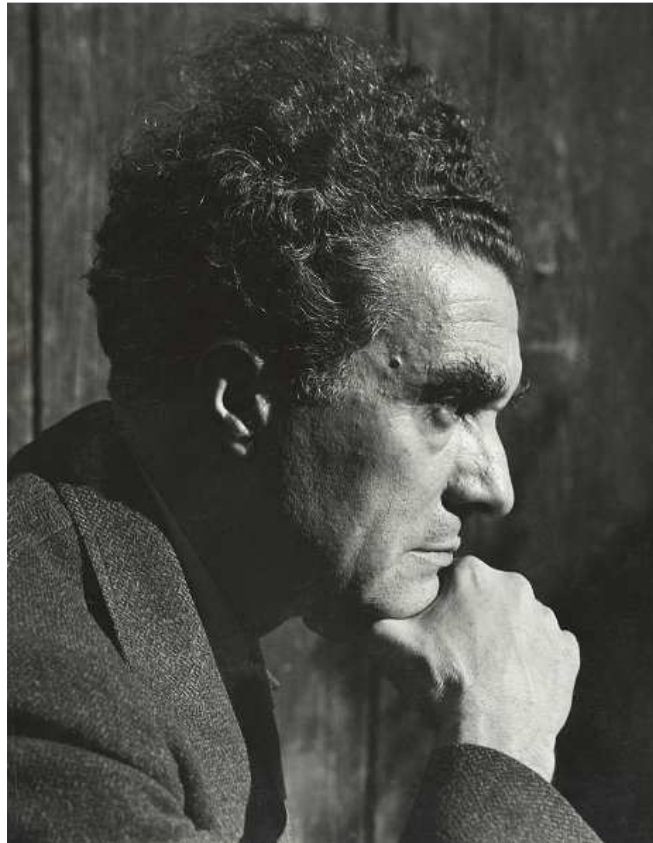
Noskowiak and Weston broke up in **1935**. **Group f.64** disbanded by the end of the same year. Writing from and about this time in **Noskowiak's** career grows increasingly scarce, but exciting work followed and her practice continued to develop. That same year **Noskowiak** moved to San Francisco and opened a portrait studio on Union Street. In **1936**, she was among eight photographers hired by the New Deal-era Federal Art Project to document California during the Great Depression.

This appointment coincided with, and possibly heightened, **Noskowiak's** interest in landscape photography. One remarkable photograph from this body of work is an undated and untitled image of the Mendocino coast. The Pacific Ocean is seen in the background as waves crash on the shore. The weather appears calm and the sky is clear. A patch of burned forest greets viewers on a placid day. Closest to the viewer is a skinny trunk, burned almost to disintegration. The image benefits from a wider angle than Cottonwood Tree, juxtaposing the majesty of the Mendocino coast with the grim aftermath of fire. The lighting, while not as dramatic as Calla Lily, gives gravity to the scene.

Another untitled image looks out on the San Francisco Bay as thick clouds fill the sky. Several piers along San Francisco's Embarcadero jut into the Bay, calmer than the waters outside Mendocino. Yerba Buena Island, Treasure Island and the East Bay are in the distance. The newly-

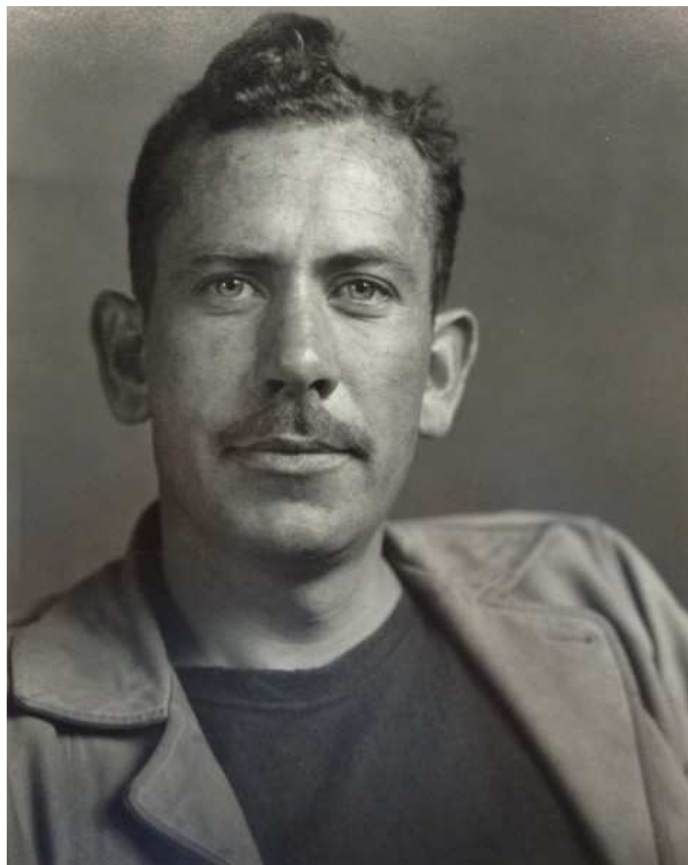
built Bay Bridge briefly enters the frame before disappearing into Yerba Buena Island. Improving on her earlier work, **Noskowiak** demonstrates a deft handling of lighting and architectural elements.

Commercial Work



Edgard Varèse (Sonya Noskowiak)

Like most photographers of her time, **Noskowiak** engaged in commercial work and commissions to make a living. She was a prolific portrait photographer, an art she learned in Carmel. Alongside family members, friends and wealthy individuals whose stations in life are lost to time, **Noskowiak** photographed many prominent figures of the day. Her subjects included painter **Jean Charlot**, dancer **Martha Graham**, composer **Edgard Varèse**, teenage violinist **Isaac Stern**, and writers **Langston Hughes** and **John Steinbeck**. Her most well-known portraits are two of **Steinbeck**, among the few taken of the author in the '30s before the bestseller ***The Grapes of Wrath*** won him the **Pulitzer Prize**. These portraits are still widely used, often without acknowledging the photographer.



John Steinbeck (Sonya Noskowiak)

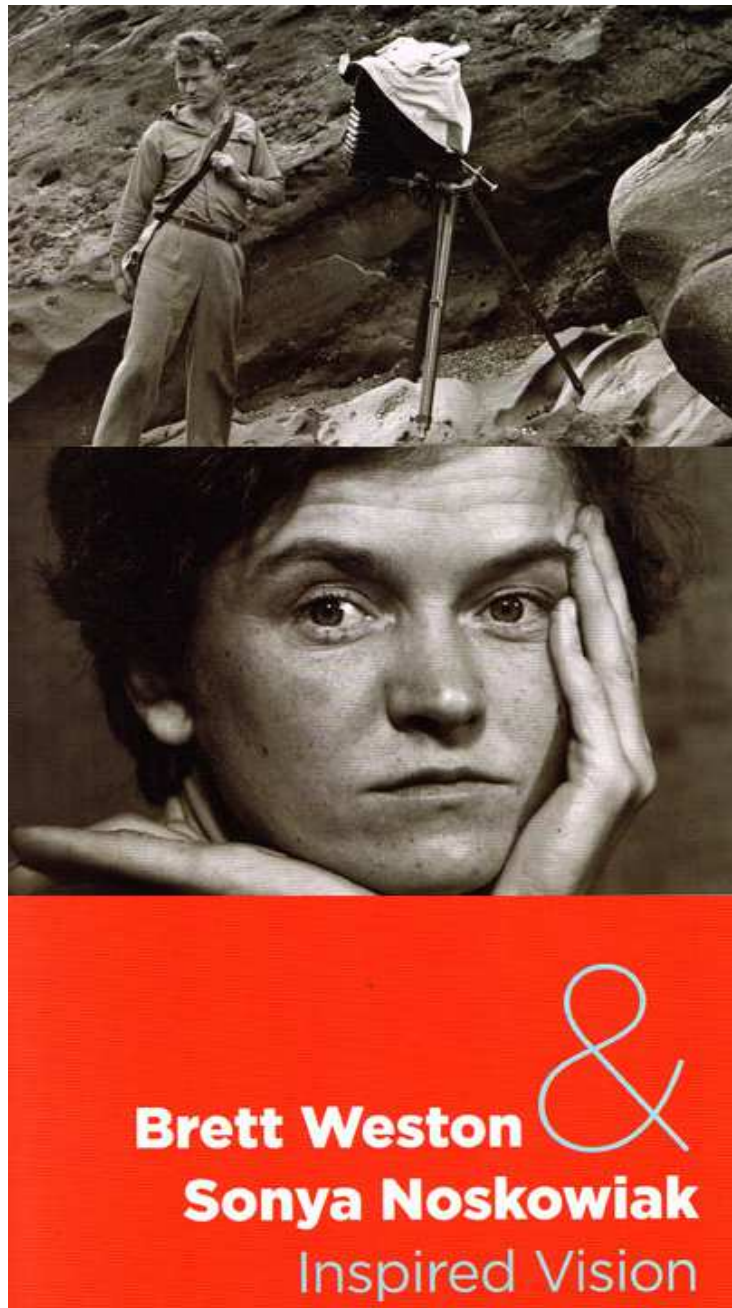
It is believed **Noskowiak** ceased making fine art work in **the mid-1940s**, but she continued working in commercial photography through **the early 1960s**. She created images for manufacturers of lamps and stoves, as well as for architects. Much of this work is beautiful, technical and creative. One noteworthy photograph depicts a woman standing on a staircase landing, looking through a glass block wall. The photo is not **Noskowiak's** typical subject matter — *the minimal, orderly image resembles editorial work* — but the artist's touch is present. Black and white clash together in the service of an enchanting image. The woman wears a long black dress that drapes to the floor. Light glares through the glass wall, calling attention to the subject's jaw line, the muscles in her arm and the folds in her blouse and dress. The architectural elements fold into one another, framing her figure.

Noskowiak's Legacy

In **1965**, **Noskowiak** was diagnosed with bone cancer. She no longer practiced photography, but she lived another ten years until **passing on April 28, 1975**, in Greenbrae, California. It is difficult to determine exactly what **Noskowiak's** influence on photography has been. **Group f.64** profoundly shaped photography in the twentieth century, pulling it away from a reliance on other art forms.

During her time with **Group f.64**, **Noskowiak** was in close contact with her contemporaries and her work was well regarded. In exhibitions, her photographs likely influenced colleagues along with aspiring photographers. Yet when **Noskowiak and Weston** separated, her photography was no longer discussed, even though some of her strongest work was created during that time. **Richard Gadd**, director of Weston Gallery in Carmel, nonetheless believes that, as an independent female photographer in the **1930s**, she was influential in helping forge a path for younger photographers.

According to **Gadd**, **Noskowiak** didn't make more than a handful of prints from a single negative because there weren't enough sales to justify it. There are a half-dozen or fewer prints of any given image, he estimates; many are held in private collections. Because of this scarcity, **Noskowiak's** work infrequently shows up in exhibitions or at auction.



In recent years, however, **Noskowiak's** work has been included in group shows at Weston Gallery, Scott Nichols Gallery in San Francisco, the Monterey Museum of Art, the Oakland Museum of California and the Portland Museum of Art in Maine. In **2011**, **Noskowiak and Brett Weston** shared a two-person exhibition at the Phoenix Art Museum. Eight of Noskowiak's works are currently on view at the Allentown Art Museum in Pennsylvania, alongside Cunningham and other female photographers. The exhibition, **Weston's Women**, appears to consider the accomplished artists primarily as they relate to **Edward Weston**.

It's not necessary to view large museum exhibitions or establish a lineage from prominent photographers to **Noskowiak** in order to appreciate her work. **Noskowiak**'s photographs offer access to the career of a talented artist and craftsperson and a fascinating glimpse at a transformative time in art and American history.

(*) <http://www.creativephotography.org/artists/sonya-noskowiak>

(**) <https://archive.org/stream/cameracraft401933phot#page/198/mode/2up>

Matthew Harrison Tedford <6-4-15>

<http://ww2.kqed.org/arts/2015/04/06/sonya-noskowiak-a-groundbreaking-but-forgotten-photographer/>

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Sonya **Noskowiak**

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